

Toward a Spirituality of Politics

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Abstract

This article revisits Francis's vision of politics as one of the highest forms of charity. It argues that Francis's concept of "political charity" goes beyond a mere repetition of classical church social teaching on politics to ground a spirituality for Christian politicians. He does this mainly in two ways: the first is by inscribing the main Christian virtue of *love* at the heart of political practice; the second is by portraying both politics and economics as Christian vocations to be embraced as noble paths to holiness. Finally, I introduce an African perspective into the discussion for context and illustration.

Keywords

Africa, charity, common good, politics, Pope Francis, spirituality

Introduction

In his writings, Francis calls for "a renewed appreciation of politics"¹ without which the world community cannot successfully address the major challenges confronting humanity today. He states that

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1. Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (October 3, 2020), §180, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (hereafter cited as *FT*).

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for many people today, politics is a distasteful word, often due to the mistakes, corruption and inefficiency of some politicians. There are also attempts to discredit politics, to replace it with economics or to twist it to one ideology or another. Yet can our world function without politics? Can there be an effective process of growth towards universal fraternity and social peace without a sound political life?²

The purpose of this paper is to appraise Francis's understanding of and engagement with politics as a foundation for a spirituality of politics. Since the beginning of his pontificate, Francis has visited ten African countries: Kenya, Uganda, and the Central African Republic in 2015; Egypt in 2017; Mozambique, Mauritius, Madagascar, and Morocco in 2019; and the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan in 2023. During these trips, which have had both pastoral and political overtones, papal speeches addressed a variety of issues including evangelization, Christian faith, poverty, environmental concerns, social justice, peace, migration, respect for human dignity, interreligious dialogue, and the plight of youth. Among the multitude of issues addressed by the pope, one is of particular significance for Africa: the plight of youth. The African population is the youngest in the world: "Currently, around 60% of Africa's population is younger than 25 years, and more than a third between 15–34 years old. By 2100, Africa should still have the youngest population worldwide with a median age of 35."³ It follows that the future of human development in Africa, including in the church, will greatly depend on how it addresses the challenges facing its youth, especially the plague of youth unemployment and frustrations that Francis places among the world's priorities.⁴ It is from this context of a youthful African continent confronted on a daily basis with the insanities of bad politics—that is, the politics of death—that we read and appraise Francis's vision of good politics.

The term "politics" in its Weberian sense means "striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state."⁵ Weber further adds that "he who is active in politics strives for power either as a means in serving other aims, ideal or egoistic, or as 'power for power's sake,' that is, in order to enjoy the prestige feeling that power gives."⁶ Weber's definition suggests that political power can be pursued as a means to an end or as an end in itself. In contrast, since *Rerum Novarum*, Catholic social teaching has consistently taught that the main end of political power from a Christian perspective is the service of the common good and the promotion of social justice. The common good is defined as the "the sum

2. *FT*, §176.

3. Camilla Rocca and Ines Schultes, "Africa's Youth: Action Needed Now to Support the Continent's Greatest Asset" (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, August 2020), 1, <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2020-08/international-youth-day-research-brief.pdf>.

4. Francis, *Christus Vivit* (March 25, 2019), §271, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html (hereafter cited as *CV*).

5. Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 77–128 at 78.

6. Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," 78.

total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”⁷ It is therefore the business of politics to create these basic social conditions that make it possible for individuals and groups to lead a good life.

In chapter 5 of *Fratelli Tutti* (“A Better Kind of Politics”), Francis dwells on his vision of politics and argues that

the development of a global community of fraternity based on the practice of social friendship on the part of peoples and nations calls for a better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good. Sadly, politics today often takes forms that hinder progress towards a different world.⁸

For the purpose of this paper, we want to look beyond *Fratelli Tutti* and explore other papal exhortations and encyclicals. The conceptual foundations for much of what Francis develops on politics in his latter documents is laid out in *Evangelium Gaudium*—that is, in the very first major magisterial publication of his pontificate. I argue that Francis’s contribution to Catholic social teaching on politics is encapsulated in the concept of “political charity” in which he attempts, as will be shown in the next section, to ground a spirituality of politics. The second section dwells on the two major threats to good politics in today’s world, populism and neoliberalism. The third and last section explores the relevance of Francis’s teaching on politics from an African perspective.

From Benedict to Francis

In this section, I argue that although the concept of political charity developed by Francis is rooted in the concept of “social charity” found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,⁹ some aspects of Francis’s approach can be found in his predecessor’s work. In *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict sets out not only to build a theology and spirituality of Christian love but also to show how it takes shape in the numerous charitable activities of church and non-church agencies. Furthermore, he spells out the distinctive features of ecclesial charity: it should be faith active through love, ideologically neutral, proselytism-free, and rooted in prayer. Regarding the concept of social charity, Benedict states that “even if the specific expressions of ecclesial charity can

7. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), §26, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html; for a comprehensive and critical exploration of the relevance of the Christian concept of the common good in contemporary modern liberal democracies, see David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

8. *FT*, §154.

9. “The principle of solidarity, also articulated in terms of ‘friendship’ or ‘social charity,’ is a direct demand of human and Christian brotherhood.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1939, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P6Q.HTM.

never be confused with the activity of the State, it still remains true that charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as ‘social charity.’”¹⁰ Thus, political activity on the part of the lay faithful is clearly pictured here as one of the forms of social charity.

However, Francis is the first pope to explicitly locate the praxis of love in the realm of politics. Although Benedict portrays good politics as a form of lived social charity, he tends to limit its prime manifestations to the charitable works of the church.¹¹ Benedict does not develop the application of the concept and practice of charity to the political realm any further. Even when he distinguishes charity from justice, he simply reaffirms the church’s traditional social teaching that “justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics” and that “the just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility of politics” and not of the church.¹² In one sense, Benedict’s working notion of the church here appears restrictive, especially in the light of Vatican II’s definition of the church as “people of God.” Although he holds that politics as the just ordering of society is not the direct responsibility of the church, he also states that “the direct duty to work for a just ordering of society, on the other hand, is proper to the lay faithful. As citizens of the State, they are called to take part in public life in a personal capacity.”¹³ I contend that since the lay faithful engaged in politics are also members of the church, it is appropriate to speak of the church’s direct involvement in politics through the lay faithful. The lay faithful who, in the name of their faith, seek to enliven politics with the Christian virtue of love exemplify the direct involvement of the church in politics. This is what Francis, it seems to me, calls “political charity” or “political love.” By taking this view, he goes a step further than his predecessor to suggest that the just ordering of society—which is good politics—is an act of love for one’s community.

The activities of social charity—through which individuals or groups join their efforts in “social friendship” to promote fraternity and justice for all—find their fulfillment in the kind of good politics that Francis sees as one of the highest forms of charity.¹⁴ Therefore, to structure society so as to make social institutions serve the common

10. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (December 25, 2005), §29, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html (hereafter cited as *DCE*).

11. *DCE*, §40. For example, he states that “saints such as Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, John of God, Camillus of Lellis, Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, Giuseppe B. Cottolengo, John Bosco, Luigi Orione, Teresa of Calcutta to name but a few—stand out as lasting models of social charity for all people of good will.” *DCE*, §40.

12. *DCE*, §28.

13. *DCE*, §29.

14. Here Francis retrieves a teaching of Pope Pius XI who defined politics as “the highest form of charity” in an address to Italian Catholic intellectuals in December 1927. He quotes Pius XI in an address to a delegation of the Fraternity of Chemin Neuf on Monday, May 16, 2022, accessible at <https://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/2022-05/ing-020/unconditional-respect-in-politics.html>.

good is an act of charity: it is political charity.¹⁵ Francis views political charity as one of the highest forms of charity because of its multiplying effects, which allow it to serve a more comprehensive purpose than the charitable activities of individuals or groups. Francis provides a few telling examples:

It is an act of charity to assist someone suffering, but it is also an act of charity, even if we do not know that person, to work to change the social conditions that caused his or her suffering. If someone helps an elderly person cross a river, that is a fine act of charity. The politician, on the other hand, builds a bridge, and that too is an act of charity. While one person can help another by providing something to eat, the politician creates a job for that other person, and thus practices a lofty form of charity that ennobles his or her political activity.¹⁶

Political charity is also manifested in the spirit of openness to everyone for dialogue. Good politics creates an inclusive culture of dialogue that fosters tolerance, mutual understanding, and social friendship.¹⁷ Even as forms of fanaticism, closed-mindedness, and social and cultural fragmentation proliferate in present-day society, a good politician will take the first step and insist that different voices be heard. Disagreements may well give rise to conflicts, but uniformity proves stifling and leads to cultural decay.¹⁸ According to Francis, there is room for tenderness in the practice of politics when it is no longer perceived as the “quest for power” for power’s sake, but as one of the highest forms of charity. Francis states that “politics too must make room for a tender love of others.”¹⁹

Francis attempts therefore to ground a spirituality of politics by placing the virtue of love at the heart of politics. In the words of Benedict, “Here politics and faith meet. Faith by its specific nature is an encounter with the living God.”²⁰ Politics as the praxis of faith, hope, and love in political and social institutions becomes “contemplation in action,” an encounter with God in the action of promoting the common good of society. In this way, love as a social virtue permeates the social fabric and moves individuals and groups to work for the transformation not only of interpersonal relations but also of social, economic, and political institutions.²¹

The second major way in which Francis ennobles politics (but also economics) is by portraying both as vocations. Business, he writes, “is a noble vocation, provided that those engaged in it see themselves challenged by a greater meaning in life.”²² Similarly, he states that “politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation

15. *FT*, §186.

16. *FT*, §186.

17. *FT*, §190.

18. *FT*, §191.

19. *FT*, §194.

20. *DCE*, §28.

21. Francis, *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015), §188 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, §§231–232 (hereafter cited as *LS*).

22. Francis, *Evangelium Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), §203, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (hereafter cited as *EG*).

and one of the highest forms of charity, in as much as it seeks the common good.”²³ A vocation is a call from God to which a human being responds to accomplish the will of God in his life. Francis is hereby suggesting that engaging in politics and business should be a matter of discernment and a response to divine calling, a way to holiness.

Francis’s commitment to the idea of politics as a form of charity imbues his political theory with a strain of idealism. Thus, placed along the spectrum of political realism (which sees politics as a game of interests where the most powerful prevails) and political idealism (which seeks to subordinate politics to common and binding ethical values), Francis is clearly a political idealist. In this, he walks in the footsteps of previous popes and of classical Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. But at the same time, Francis is not a naïve idealist. He is realistic enough to acknowledge the messiness of contemporary world politics, as exemplified by his attempts to help end the wars in South Sudan and Ukraine. As Francis rightly puts it, “War is the failure of politics and of humanity, a shameful capitulation, a stinging defeat before the forces of evil.”²⁴

The practice of political charity is confronted in the real world with the ethical narrow-mindedness of political realism that culminates in the politics of violence and death. Instead of serving life, politics, when it is not rooted in love, generates poverty, violence, and death. Francis cautions against some of the worst forms of political realism:

What is now happening, and drawing us into a perverse and barren way of thinking, is the reduction of ethics and politics to physics. Good and evil no longer exist in themselves; there is only a calculus of benefits and burdens. As a result of the displacement of moral reasoning, the law is no longer seen as reflecting a fundamental notion of justice but as mirroring notions currently in vogue. Breakdown ensues: everything is “leveled down” by a superficial bartered consensus. In the end, the law of the strongest prevails.²⁵

The pope identifies two major pathologies of political realism plaguing democracy in the world today that we consider in the next section.

Two Threats to Democracy: Populism and Liberalism

According to Francis, progress toward a better kind of politics is hindered by two main regressive ideologies: populism and liberalism. Regarding neoliberalism, Catholic social teaching has always been critical of its pathologies, even during the Cold War when so much of the church’s critical energy was focused on the dangers of communism. But Francis is the first pope to single out populism as one of the major the political ills of our times. What the two ideologies have in common is their failure to strike a healthy balance between the common good of society and the rights of individuals. On this, the pope states that the

23. *EG*, §205.

24. *FT*, §261.

25. *FT*, §210.

lack of concern for the vulnerable can hide behind a populism that exploits them demagogically for its own purposes, or a liberalism that serves the economic interests of the powerful. In both cases, it becomes difficult to envisage an open world that makes room for everyone, including the most vulnerable, and shows respect for different cultures.²⁶

Francis observes that although it is difficult today to refer to “people” without being accused of “populism” or demagoguery, it is important, when deconstructing regressive ideologies to make the necessary terminological clarifications.²⁷ For him, democracy in its very essence is defined by the legitimate, collective aspiration of every people to self-determination. Francis therefore undertakes to differentiate “popular” leaders from “populist” leaders. The first group not only supports people’s sense of belonging but is able to interpret their legitimate aspirations at a point in history, to orient them toward the common good. A good biblical example of this kind of leadership would be Moses in the book of Exodus. With God’s guidance, he is able to discern the people of Israel’s aspirations for freedom and to set them in motion toward the promised land.

The dynamics are different for what Francis terms “unhealthy ‘populism.’” This occurs when “individuals are able to exploit politically a people’s culture, under whatever ideological banner, for their own personal advantage or continuing grip on power.”²⁸ Unhealthy forms of “populism” polarize rather than unite. They erect walls rather than bridges.²⁹ The politics of endless confrontation and criticism often targets not only political opponents but also vulnerable groups, such as migrants, who are portrayed as invaders and as threats to the security of the nation.

Francis calls for a renewed appreciation of the political implications of the example of the Good Samaritan.³⁰ The parable of the Good Samaritan provides a basic criterion to evaluate any social and political project by looking at the extent to which it includes everybody, especially the suffering and the marginalized.³¹ Bad politics (characterized by “social and political inertia”) deprives people, especially the poor and the marginalized, of opportunities to live better lives. Good politics not only makes opportunities available to everyone but goes the extra mile to empower the weak and the most vulnerable, so that they can take advantage of their share of the common good.³² Because of the importance of the political inclusion of all people, Francis believes that charity, “the spiritual heart of politics,”³³ is best expressed in the preferential option for the poor. The way a society regards and treats its most vulnerable and powerless members is indicative of the health of its politics: “That gaze is at the heart of the authentic spirit of politics.”³⁴

26. *FT*, §155.

27. *FT*, §157.

28. *FT*, §159.

29. *FT*, §37.

30. *FT*, §66.

31. *FT*, §69.

32. *FT*, §108.

33. *FT*, §187.

34. *FT*, §187.

The second major threat to the idea of “people,” and therefore to democracy itself, is a distorted liberalism that characterizes “individualistic liberal approaches which view society as merely the sum of coexisting interests” and makes little or no room for “community and cultural bonds.”³⁵ A sane political system strives for a healthy balance between the interests of the community and those of the individual members of the community. Individualistic liberal approaches to social life have proven ineffective in the fight against poverty because they favor “unregulated economic interests and societal institutions at the service of those who already enjoy too much power.”³⁶ They are inherently selfish and inapt for addressing social inequalities, thereby condemning the poor to remain at the margins of political power. Francis rejects the theory of the “invisible hand” and reinstates the crucial role of the state in redistributing the returns of economic growth.³⁷ He insistently cautions against allowing “economics to take over the real power of the state.”³⁸ Instead, politics should regulate economics to make it serve the common good.³⁹ For example, with regard to the specific case of Amazonia,⁴⁰ Francis denounces the unethical behavior of corrupt politicians who are accomplices of businesses that harm the Amazon region and turn globalization into a “new version of colonialism.”⁴¹

Francis further underlines the fact that the cultural model bred by the globalization of economy makes us neighbors but not brothers, weakens the common good and communal ties, encourages an individualist and unbridled consumerism that is neither ecologically nor socially sustainable, advances the interests of the powerful to the detriments of the weak and the poor, and submits political life to the dictates of financial systems. Francis rightly denounces attempts to impose such cultures on weaker and poorer nations as “new forms of cultural colonization.”⁴²

Balancing the Local, National, and Global: Subsidiarity

Globalism threatens not only the social well-being of the individual, but also the different levels of social organizing the Catholic social tradition sees as essential to human social living. The Catholic tradition appeals to the principle of subsidiarity to safeguard these different forms of social organization. Subsidiarity calls for a healthy

35. *FT*, §163.

36. *FT*, §166.

37. *FT*, §168.

38. *FT*, §177.

39. *LS*, §189.

40. From October 6 to 27, 2019, a synod of bishops of the Pan-Amazonian region was held in Rome to explore new paths of evangelization and underscore the crucial role that this region, coveted by multinationals for selfish interests, plays in the preservation of the health of the planet.

41. Francis, *Querida Amazonia* (February 2, 2020), §14, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html.

42. *FT*, §14.

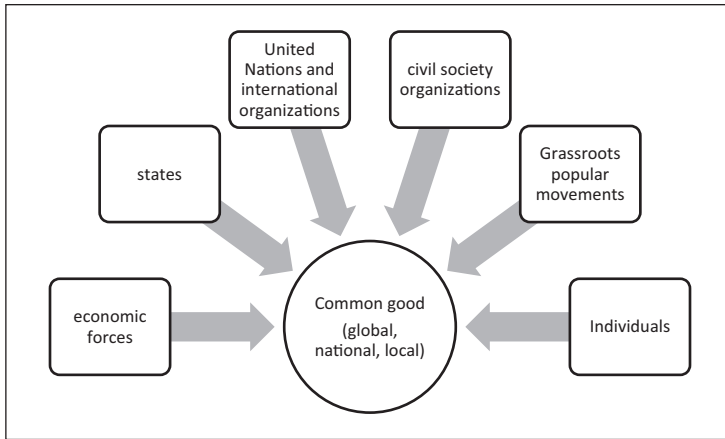


Figure 1. Stakeholders in the promotion of the common good.

balance of power between local, national, and international levels of politics for the promotion of the common good (see Figure 1).

Some of the practices initiated at the local level in the form of cooperatives or associations are effective because they are rooted in indigenous values. Through them, communities exercise their creativity in seeking solutions to local problems. It is the role of the state to create conditions conducive to these local processes through which individuals and groups contribute to sustainable livelihoods.⁴³ But local and national levels of politics are not enough to effectively address the global problems facing humanity. Because of the tendency of global economic and financial forces to weaken the power of nation-states and exacerbate global ills,⁴⁴ “it is essential to devise stronger and more efficiently organized international institutions, with functionaries who are appointed fairly by agreement among national governments, and empowered to impose sanctions.”⁴⁵ The pope therefore reiterates the “urgent need of a true world political authority” coupled with diplomacy to tackle global concerns such as reviving world economies, disarmament, food security, peace, protection of the environment, regulation of migration, and so forth.

This role would ideally be played by the United Nations. However, powerful nations tend to use their right of veto not to promote the universal common good but to preserve or promote particular interests. Francis thus calls for the reform of the

43. *LS*, §178.

44. Vincent Cable, “The Diminished Nation-State: A Study in the Loss of Economic Power,” *Daedalus* 124, no. 2, (1995): 23–53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027296>; Kamil Omoteso and Hakeem Yusuf, “Accountability of Transnational Corporations in the Developing World: The Case for an Enforceable International Mechanism,” *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 13, no. 1 (2017): 54–71, <https://doi.org/10.1108/cpoib-08-2014-0040>.

45. *LS*, §175.

United Nations “to prevent this Organization from being delegitimized, since its problems and shortcomings are capable of being jointly addressed and resolved.”⁴⁶ The pope likewise commends the work of civil society organizations that “help to compensate for the shortcomings of the international community, its lack of coordination in complex situations, its lack of attention to fundamental human rights and to the critical needs of certain groups.”⁴⁷ Overall, for Francis, one major way of addressing the pathologies of liberalism and populism is to constantly negotiate a healthy balance between the good of the person and the good of the community.

Reading Francis from Africa

For the African continent, its booming youth population can become an opportunity if good politics create conditions conducive to unlocking their potential. Francis encourages world youth not to be “spectators” to their own lives, but to “enter political life so as to build the common good”⁴⁸ and to “fight apathy and offer a Christian response to the social and political troubles emerging in different parts of the world.”⁴⁹ Francis reminds youth that in the face of the degradation of political mores, withdrawing into sectarian forms of sociality is not the solution. Instead, he encourages their political engagement, arguing that

the lay vocation is directed above all to charity within the family and to social and political charity. It is a concrete and faith-based commitment to the building of a new society. It involves living in the midst of society and the world in order to bring the Gospel everywhere, to work for the growth of peace, harmony, justice, human rights and mercy, and thus for the extension of God’s kingdom in this world.⁵⁰

In keeping with Francis’s critique of populism and liberalism, one particular concern that strikes a chord in the minds and hearts of many in Africa is the importance of the community as the precondition for the existence and fulfillment of the individual person. A number of African scholars have argued that in African societies before colonization, the community was more important than the individual. Reference is often made to the well-known Bantu social philosophy of “Ubuntu”: it is encapsulated in the formula “I am because we are” and binds together in a dynamic tension the “I” and the “We.”⁵¹ But after the colonial introduction of liberal approaches to the economy and politics, and, encouraged by the current processes of the globalization of market forces, Africa has come to embrace the culture of individual rights in a way that risks eroding the traditional importance given to community. The solution, of course,

46. *FT*, §173.

47. *FT*, §175.

48. *CV*, §170.

49. *CV*, §174.

50. *CV*, §168.

51. Adrian D. van Breda, “Developing the Notion of Ubuntu as African Theory for Social Work Practice,” *Social Work* 55, no. 4 (2019): 439–50, <https://dx.doi.org/10.15270/52-2-762>.

is not to promote the individual over against the community or the community against the individual, but to strike a healthy balance between the rights of individuals and the primacy of the common good. As Francis rightly states:

Each of us is fully a person when we are part of a people; at the same time, there are no peoples without respect for the individuality of each person. “People” and “person” are correlative terms. Nonetheless, there are attempts nowadays to reduce persons to isolated individuals easily manipulated by powers pursuing spurious interests. Good politics will seek ways of building communities at every level of social life, in order to recalibrate and reorient globalization and thus avoid its disruptive effects.⁵²

Good politics as envisioned by Francis is still rare in Africa. Politics in many African countries remains a matter of life and death. Most of the African continent is subjected to poor domestic and international politics that introduces structural violence and injustices that leave the majority with no option other than to struggle daily for survival against the forces of death.⁵³ A leading African political thinker has described this condition as “necropolitics” as a way of capturing the daily and “deadly working of power” abuse.⁵⁴

An expression of the pathological populism confronting a number of African countries is found in the endeavors by some leaders to modify their constitutions and remain in power as long as they want by invoking the “will of the people.” The subregion of Central Africa—which includes countries with some of the longest reigning heads of states, such as Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Congo—is the best illustration of this “unhealthy populism.” The problem with these long reigns is that they have not benefited the people in terms of fostering their development and promoting the common good. On the contrary, the majority of the populations of these countries languish in poverty while their rulers misuse public funds for their selfish interests.

“Unhealthy populism” is also frequently experienced in Africa in the form of an “ethnic politics” or “religious politics” in which political leaders seek to garner political support by manipulating people’s identification with particular cultural or religious communities. This strategy has a powerful polarizing effect and sometimes results in interreligious or intercommunity conflicts over control of the political realm. Many electoral crises and conflicts in the recent history of Africa have been fueled by the

52. *FT*, §182.

53. On the notion of structural violence, see Johan, Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301>; Paul Farmer, Margaret Connors, and Janie Simmons, *Women, Poverty, and AIDS: Sex, Drugs, and Structural Violence* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1996); Jacquineau Azétso, *Structural Violence, Population Health and Health Equity in Africa* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2010).

54. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics. Theory in Forms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

manipulation of ethnic or religious identities encouraged by unscrupulous politicians seeking to mobilize an electorate.⁵⁵

With regard to the globalization of neoliberalism, African economies are also a good illustration of how seriously globalizing market forces fail to benefit all people, especially those of Africa. Although the continent is replete with natural resources, these resources are mercilessly exploited by multinationals, and its people remain among the poorest in the world. Francis underlines the importance of popular movements that “unite the unemployed, temporary and informal workers and many others who do not easily find a place in existing structures.”⁵⁶ This is particularly relevant for African economies dominated by “informal” commercial activities through which the poor earn their means of survival. The ongoing debates about how to better structure or “formalize” the informal sector of African economies are more often oriented toward making them more fiscally responsible, with the related risk of making the poor even more vulnerable to state predation. Grassroots movements from these sections of economic life are therefore important for giving voice to the poor in decision-making processes.

Moreover, Africa is witnessing today what some analysts have described as the “new scramble for Africa,” with world powers competing for the control of its natural resources and business opportunities.⁵⁷ However, there is little hope that the African poor will benefit from these endeavors because of the enduring predatory practices of multinationals—an example of which is occurring in the mineral-rich and also conflict-ridden regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The paradox of the African continent is that although it is one of the richest of the world in terms of highly coveted natural resources, it also has one of the largest shares of extreme poverty. It still lacks responsible leadership capable of translating the exploitation of its riches into shared well-being. Poverty coupled with injustice breeds conflicts over the distribution of resources. Despite some notable progress made in a few African countries toward good governance, politics has overall failed to deliver justice and peace to the majority of Africans.

African’s population growth makes the need to address these issues more pressing. The current population of Africa is about 1.3 billion, according to United Nations estimates. This means that it comprises about 16.5 percent of the total world population (estimated at eight billion in 2022). Sub-Saharan Africa is the fastest-growing region in the world. Between 2022 and 2050, its population “is expected to almost double, surpassing 2 billion inhabitants by the late 2040s.”⁵⁸ The Catholic Church is

55. Rok Ajulu, “Politicised Ethnicity, Competitive Politics and Conflict in Kenya: A Historical Perspective,” *African Studies* 61, no. 2 (2002): 251–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0002018022000032947>; see also Dominika Koter, *Beyond Ethnic Politics in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

56. *FT*, §169.

57. Pádraig Carmody, *The New Scramble for Africa* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

58. United Nations, Department of Economics and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects 2022*, https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/wpp2022_summary_of_results.pdf, 5.

also growing faster in Africa than in any other part of the world. Catholics numbered 256,840,000 at the end of 2022, making up 19.33 percent of the total number of Catholics in the world.⁵⁹ One of the major consequences of these demographics both for world politics and for church politics is that if the rapid population growth in Africa is not accompanied by responsible political leadership, it will continue to frustrate global, national, and local policies aimed at combating poverty, regulating migration, and reducing environmental degradation.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that Francis's major contribution to Catholic social teaching on politics resides in the attempt, admittedly embryonic, to elaborate a spirituality of politics founded on the concept of "political charity." By putting side by side the concepts of politics and of charity, Francis invites Christians to practice love in the field of politics, to inscribe spirituality at the heart of public life.⁶⁰ On the other hand, the affirmation of the public responsibility of the church is balanced by the pope's acknowledgement of the complexity of social dynamics and engineering that calls for humility and collaboration.⁶¹

Therefore the role of religion in public life is to breed "politicians with soul."⁶² In the context of Africa—where most people are religiously affiliated—it is difficult to separate religion from politics. Although secularism is enshrined in most constitutions, religion is so embedded in all spheres of social life that the influence of religious leaders in public life is taken for granted.⁶³

Yet, it remains a challenge for the church and individual believers to translate their theological commitments about social life and the common good into ethical practices within political spheres. Piety tends to prevail over Christian social and political witness.⁶⁴ Most African Christians have yet to embrace politics as a "noble vocation" at the service of the common good.

59. FiDES, Catholic Church Statistics, http://www.fides.org/en/news/72956-VATICAN_Catholic_Church_Statistics_2022.

60. EG, §183. For that matter, with the recent resurgence of religion in public life, secularization theories are being critically reappraised; on this, see J. Stolz, "Secularization Theories in the Twenty-First Century: Ideas, Evidence, and Problems. Presidential address," *Social Compass* 67, no. 2 (2020): 282–308. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768620917320>.

61. EG, §184; §241. See also Francis, *Laudato Si'*.

62. EG, §273. See also Karl Rahner, "Function of the Church as Critic of Society," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 12 (New York: Seabury, 1972), 230–31.

63. L. Lado, "Le rôle public de l'Église catholique en Afrique," *Études* 417 (2012): 163–74. <https://doi.org/10.3917/etu.4173.0163>; E. K. Bongmba, "Religious Communities and the Negotiation of Public Religion," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 50, nos. 1–2 (2021): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700666-12340188>; J. Abbink, "Religion and Politics in Africa: The Future of 'The Secular,'" *Africa Spectrum* 49, no. 3 (2014): 83–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000203971404900304>.

64. T. Kuperus and Richard Asante, "Christianity, Citizenship, and Political Engagement among Ghanaian Youth," *African Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (May 2021): 37–61.

Francis's call for a "renewed appreciation of politics" is an invitation to look at politics as a way to holiness and to embrace politics as vocation.⁶⁵ Although Francis does not innovate doctrinally or conceptually, he revamps existing ethical guidelines to promote the common good and address contemporary forms of regressive ideologies that threaten human dignity. In this sense, his critique of political "populism" is a valuable contribution. Because so few politicians genuinely serve the common good, the pope turns to prayer to beseech God's help:

I ask God to give us more politicians capable of sincere and effective dialogue aimed at healing the deepest roots—and not simply the appearances—of the evils in our world! . . . I beg the Lord to grant us more politicians who are genuinely disturbed by the state of society, the people, the lives of the poor! It is vital that government leaders and financial leaders take heed and broaden their horizons, working to ensure that all citizens have dignified work, education and healthcare.⁶⁶

Praying for the emergence of good politicians at all levels of world governance is another instance where politics and spirituality meet. Therefore, a good Christian politician does politics on his or her knees.

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65. Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (March 19, 2018), §78, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html.

66. *EG*, §205.